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ABSTRACT

This brief paper defines participatory action research, reviews the literature on its use, and offers examples of how researchers and practitioners are applying principles of participatory action research data to select effective practices and support change and innovation in schools. Generation of data-based strategies in natural environments is illustrated by a current study in which occupational and physical therapists are paired with researchers to conduct individualized research. Promotion of inclusive schooling practices is supported by several examples of participatory action research efforts to provide information for school improvement initiatives. Other examples include several projects that are conducting collaborative family research. Benefits to families of this approach are noted, including expanding the relevance and utilization of research to families. A final section looks at use of participatory action research to study social inclusion of people with disabilities at worksites. Emphasis is on involvement of all stakeholders from the beginning and equalizing power among participants. (DB)

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Applications of Participatory Action Research with Students Who Have Disabilities

Cynthia Warger and Jane Burnette

Participatory action research is an approach in which researchers and stakeholders (those individuals who might benefit from the research findings) collaboratively engage in the various stages of the research process. Participatory action research provides for greater influence of stakeholders in the research process and a higher level of support for the implementation of research findings in practice. This digest offers several examples of how researchers and practitioners are using participatory action research data to select effective practices and support change and innovation. The following sections illustrate applications of participatory action research in related services for young children, inclusion in elementary schools, working with families, and transition to adulthood.

Generating Data-based Strategies in Natural Environments

It is important for related service providers to validate what they do in their daily practice to ensure that their services improve the quality of life for children and their families. Participatory action research can help therapists explore questions about the efficacy of therapy practices within a child's and family's natural environments.

A study in progress at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia pairs therapists with research mentors to conduct individualized research. Occupational and physical therapists implement small-scale research studies with a child and/or family who are part of their caseload. To support the research process, the research mentor provides guidance on formulating research questions, conducting the study, interpreting the results, and preparing a presentation on results.

The therapists volunteer to receive training related to best practices in natural environments, data collection, and other aspects of research investigations. The nature and type of data to be collected depends upon decisions made by each therapist/mentor team. Much of the data and documentation required for this type of participatory action research may already part of the child's individualized family services plan (IFSP).

According to Phillipa Campbell, the study's director, these collaborative research teams work because there is ongoing contact between the mentors and therapists. Mentors need to be present at all stages of the research, and they must feel comfortable sharing their expertise and skills as part of the research process.

Promoting Inclusive Schooling Practices

Research shows that the participatory action research approach can improve professional practice and promote the inclusion of students with disabilities, including those with significant challenges, in general classrooms. In studies with elementary school teachers and administrators in several school districts, teachers and administrators were introduced to participatory action research methods and then guided through the steps of sharing issues and forming issue-focused workgroups that developed action-based and technical support plans (Salisbury, Wilson, Swartz, Palombaro, & Wassel,1997). Action plans described the question, the type of information to be collected, and the proposed methods for addressing the issue. Monthly workgroup meetings were held to discuss findings, analyze data, explore emerging issues, and determine next steps.

Another study addressed how building principals might use participatory action research to collect data to provide information for school improvement initiatives (Salisbury, Wilson, & Palombaro, 1998). Administrators used the process to become more reflective and to cultivate a culture of inquiry with their teachers about special education implementation issues.

Throughout the process, these researchers documented lessons learned about the adoption and use of participatory action research:

- Administrative support—above and beyond endorsement—is essential. Principals were involved in the workgroups, facilitated use of the process at the building level, and supported incorporation of inclusive practices.
- Time and opportunity for reflection facilitates the process. For example, teachers regularly scheduled meetings and were initially provided with release time. Even busy principals scheduled appointments with themselves to reflect on information.
- Research questions and their results must have practical appeal.
- Principals must value collaboration and express this value to others.
- Educators embrace a comfort level with not having all of the answers up front and are willing to solve problems through a collaborative process of classroom-based and/or school-based inquiry.

Conducting Collaborative Family Research

An OSEP-funded parent information center, The Grassroots Consortium on Disabilities, and the Beach Center on Family and Disabilities at University of Kansas have established a partnership to provide a participatory action research model for collaboration between researchers and families. The goal is for participatory

action research teams composed of researchers and culturally and linguistically diverse families to discover new relationships that broaden the scope of their commitment to research as a means of social change and contribute to a deeper understanding of the critical role research plays in finding practical solutions for families.

In one project, researchers supported families of children with behavioral difficulties in learning how to gather data about their child (e.g., strengths, needs, likes, dislikes), develop a functional behavioral assessment for their child, and participate as full partners in the development of a positive behavioral support plan. Participatory action research produced the following advantages:

- Increased the relevance of research to the concerns of family members.
- Increased the rigor of research and increased the benefit to researchers in minimizing logistical problems.
- Increased utilization of research by families.
- Enhanced the empowerment of researchers, families, and other stakeholders.

There were also several advantages for family members. Parents gained a sense that their opinions and experiences were valued. Their concerns were heard and their comments were incorporated into research that will benefit society. They also expressed appreciation because the process necessitated their having to think about things they may never have considered before, such as the determinants of quality of life for them personally and for their families.

Challenges encountered in using participatory action research with families include time and resources. "Every kind of collaborative problem solving approach requires time," Ursula Markey, one of the study directors, asserts. "A particularly critical element related to time is the amount needed to develop trusting relationships with families—especially those families who have felt exploited by researchers in the past." Markey says that it can sometimes take 1-2 years of ongoing communication before trust is sufficient for a genuine partnership to evolve. Resources also need to be considered, since families should be compensated for their time and reimbursed for expenses.

Studying Social Inclusion at Worksites

"Participatory action research can reduce the gap between research and practice, resulting in enhanced outcomes for students with disabilities," says Hyun-Sook Park, researcher at San Jose State University. "Collaborative decision making with stakeholders makes the selection of research questions more meaningful to them; it helps them address issues related to the implementation of innovations, which often results in actions that are more doable and sustainable overtime."

Park and her colleagues applied participatory action research to the intervention study of social inclusion at worksites (Park, Gonsier-Gerdin, Hoffman, Whaley, & Yount,1998). Stakeholders were involved at various stages in the research process—establishing research questions, collecting data, implementing interventions, validating and interpreting outcomes, and disseminating results. The intervention was viewed as a process for generating strategies to support social inclusion. Researchers and stakeholders reviewed the data about students' work and social experiences at their worksites. In work situations where the majority of students were not socially included, researchers and stakeholders interpreted the data together and generated actions to alter the situation. These discussions led to work group meetings in which researchers and stakeholders brainstormed strategies and selected some that were eventually implemented. Researchers found that the participatory action research process empowered teachers and job coaches to take ownership of their action changes and resulted in the increased social inclusion of participants with disabilities in competitive work environments.

According to Park, the key to making the process work was establishing trust and respect. "Practitioners saw that researchers were really trying to listen to them and understand their perspectives. It was a slow process, but eventually practitioners saw themselves as part of the dialogue."

Park offers the following suggestions:

- Invite full participation from the beginning.
- Expect the trust building process to take time. It may take six months to a year before collaboration around an intervention can get started.
- Equalize power among participants.
- Use language that has the same meaning for researchers and stakeholders.
- Discuss barriers to implementation and seek solutions together.

Resources

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Beach Center on Families and Disabilities
http:// www.beachcenter.org.

Grassroots Consortium on Disabilities
http://www.gcod.org

**Journal of the Association for the Severely Handicapped* (JASH) is now *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities.*

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